Bill & Stephanie
&
The Dramaturgy of Listening:
Understanding Theatrical Aurality Through Annie Baker’s Plays

by

David L. Caruso
Class of 2018

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in English and Theater

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2018
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements..................................................................................pg. 2

Forward..................................................................................................................pg. 3

Bill & Stephanie........................................................................................................pg. 4

The Dramaturgy of Listening: Understanding Theatrical Aurality Through Annie Baker’s Plays........................................pg. 63

Introduction........................................................................................................pg. 63

Sound & The Voice.................................................................................................pg. 66

Performance, Presence, & Ephemera.................................................................pg. 73

Silence & Quiet......................................................................................................pg. 78

Attention..............................................................................................................pg. 83

Conclusion............................................................................................................pg. 88

Notes......................................................................................................................pg. 95

Bibliography..........................................................................................................pg. 97
Acknowledgements

Quiara Alegría Hudes
You’re the smartest, wisest person I’ve ever met.
Words cannot capture how grateful I am to have you as a mentor.
Remember when you asked me about this almost two and a half years ago?

Marcela Oteiza & Katherine Brewer Ball
Thank you for making sure I was doing the work and holding me accountable,
For your support, belief, and other invaluable intangibles.

My Playwriting Professors
Emily Zemba, Max Reuben, Christina Anderson, Quiara Alegría Hudes.

Hirsh Sawhney & Alex Darrow
My deeply thoughtful, empathetic, and generous male role models and mentors.

Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento & Kim Weid
You’ve provided me with incredible opportunities and guidance.

My Family
Siblings, Parents, Cousins, Friends.
Minneapolis & LaPointe.

Tekla Monson
Friend & Collaborator.

Bill & Stephanie Interviewees & Confidants
Joey, Xandra, Isabel, Olivia, Jordan, Sam, Graham, Lucia, Ames, Grace, Daniel, & Maggie.

Actors
Tekla, Sammy, Alex D, Jamie, Alex O, Rose Beth
Sammy, Elias, Maggie, Rose Beth, Tyler

All of These Important People
Matthew Garrett, Claire Grace, Eddie Torres, Jessica Toltzis, Gag Reflex, Theater Club, Tom Hegg, Anne Swedberg, Dawn Alger, Kathleen Conlin, Rebecca Foster.

My Heroes (Partial List)
Annie Baker.
Dan LeFranc, Tarrell Alvin McCraney, Caryl Churchill, Quiara Alegría Hudes.
Jez Butterworth, Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins, Sarah Ruhl, Young Jean Lee, Taylor Mac.
Suzan-Lori Parks, Paula Vogel, David Sedaris, Bill Rausch, New Saloon.
Prince, Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis, The Jayhawks, Lizzo, Dessa, Alec Soth.
Elkie & Laika.
Forward

This is a two-part playwriting thesis about how listening is central to creating and interacting with performance. First, is a play that I wrote called Bill & Stephanie, which centers on two couples and their single friend, who, over the course of the night, tells them about when he ran away from his life for two weeks, and what he discovered while away. The second part is an essay titled “The Dramaturgy of Listening: Understanding Theatrical Aurality Through Annie Baker’s Plays,” which investigates how listening functions in performance. The essay focuses on the work of Annie Baker, a contemporary playwright whose plays are known for their long pauses and silences, and dialogue that uncannily reflects everyday speech.

The play, Bill & Stephanie was shared with a student audience on December 18th, 2017. It will be presented to the public on May 8th, 2018 in the Ring Family Performing Arts Hall at the Wesleyan University Center for the Arts, and will be directed by Tekla Monson.

Annie Baker’s plays are formatted inconsistently in “The Dramaturgy of Listening” only to best represent the ways in which Dramatists Play Service and Theatre Communications Group represent her work on the page. All formatting of her work is theirs (hers and the publishers).
Bill & Stephanie

Characters:

Nate, 30, Clara’s husband, Daphne’s brother
Clara, 32, Nate’s wife
Daphne, 25, Winter’s girlfriend, Nate’s sister
Winter, 26, Daphne’s girlfriend
Stephen, 24

Setting

The aftermath of a wedding reception.

Recently.

Notes on style and length:

I use line breaks to provide different types of
Rhythm
And choices
For actors and directors.

Would an audience experiencing the script aurally feel
Their presence?
I don’t know.
I’m not
Sure.

Also, there are lines that are word
Splat vomit stream of consciousness description.
These are meant to be moments of non-realism.

A “pause” is a speed bump. Pauses vary greatly in length and size.
A “silence” is felt. It is heard. A song could fit into a “long silence.”

This play is 70-80 minutes long.
“We don’t have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that’s what I want in life. [...] It’s not quite love and it’s not quite community; it’s just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team. When the check is paid and you stay at the table. When it’s four AM and no one goes to bed. That night with the guitar. That night we can't remember. That time we did, we went, we saw, we laughed, we felt. The hats.”

–Marina Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*
It’s four in the morning,
And what was a cool, crisp evening became a rainy night
Hours ago.

The stage is
A corner of a ballroom:
Big round tables,
Gold chairs,
Ornate centerpieces,
A half-eaten wedding cake in the corner,
Near the bar.

The ballroom is huge,
And stretches far beyond the stage and behind the audience.

There might be the remains of a DJ booth,
Or a violin case and an abandoned cello,
Or, a wedding band’s pun name on a drum set,
Near the dance floor,
Which is barely onstage.

Stephen is sitting down,
Alone at a table,
With his head is in his hands.
It’s hard to tell if he’s asleep
Or crying,
But he’s crying
In a tuxedo.

Winter enters and takes a few tentative steps toward Stephen.
Then,
Deciding he’s not worth the trouble
Right now
She backs offstage.
Slowly,
Guiltily.

Stephen tries to gather himself;
He wipes his eyes.

Nate enters.
He has on a similar tux,
A nicer one, though,
And he’s taken off his jacket and tie,
And rolled up the sleeves.
Nate
Dude.

Pause.

Hey
Hey hey hey hey hey
Hey.
Hey.

Stephen
I’m sorry.
I’m sorry.

Weddings make me cry.

Weddings and funerals
Weddings and funerals.

Pause.

I’m sorry.
Ok.
Okok
Here we go.
Here.
We.
Go.

He makes a motion with his arms,
Like he’s trying to stand up,
But the rest of his body doesn’t move.
Stephen looks up at Nate.
And holds his arms out so Nate can hoist him up.
Nate does nothing.
Stephen’s arms flop to his sides,
Then lap.

A small, awkward silence.
Stephen’s eyes well up with tears.

It’s just
All those people
Here
For them
Bill
When he was standing up there
And
Stephanie
Walking down the
Rose petals
Rings
It was
And then when they were up there
Together
So
It was so

*Slight pause.*

Have you ever felt that?
Like
To be so

*Big pause.*

Like

*A big awkward pause.*

**Nate**
Oh, buddy.
C’mere, buddy.
Buddy, buddy, buddy
Buddy.

*Nate holds Stephen.*

*Nate is much larger than Stephen.*

*This is the only way Nate really knows how to comfort.*

Buddy…
Shhh….

*He looks around for other people,*
*But can’t detach himself from Stephen.*

**Stephen**
I’m sorry,
I’m sorry.

**Nate**
What’s wrong?
Stephen mumbles.

Huh?
Talk to me, come on.
Come on.

Stephen
It’s just…
To have that?

Nate
What?

Stephen
Yeah
I don’t know.
You know
You have it.

Nate
I…

Stephen
With Clara.

Nate
Oh,
Yeah.
Yeah.

An awkward pause.

Daphne runs on,
Winter follows.
Daphne runs straight to Stephen.

Daphne
Are you ok?
Are you
Are you…

Stephen
What? Yeah.
Weddings and funerals
Daphne
Are you
What is he talking about?

Nate
He’s fine.

Winter
Sorry
I was just worried
So I got

Stephen
You were..?

Daphne
She came and got me and

Winter
He was crying and

Nate
Yeah? So?

Stephen
Can’t I

Daphne
You know what-

Nate
It was only

Winter
Seemed really sad

Daphne
We have to be

Stephen
Seriously?

Winter
So I ran and got
Nate
Letting off some steam

Stephen
Weddings and funerals

Daphne
I’m just trying to be-

Nate
CAN’T A GUY
HAVE A GOOD
MOTHER
FUCKING
CRY
EVERY NOW AND THEN
IN FUCKING PEACE
WITHOUT PEOPLE
BUTTING
IN HIS
MOTHER
FUCKING
BUSINESS
???

Silence.
Nobody looks at Nate.

Stephen (Breaking the tension)
Really, guys.
I’m fine.
I’m not sad.
I’m not crying because I’m sad.
I’m crying
Well
Not joy
But tears of
I don’t know

Daphne
Oh.
Uh
Ok.
Great.
Nate
I don’t see what the big deal is
Here.

Winter
Daph–

Daphne
Nate

Nate
What?
Let the guy be

Daphne
*Nate.*

Stephen *(to Nate)*
Well,
Uh,
I don’t think you know that, uh
I went missing a few months ago
So that’s why
I guess
They’re worried.

Nate
What

Stephen
I wanted to see
How long it would take
For people to notice
I was gone?

So I ran away.
It was stupid,
Stupid.

Daphne
We were looking all over
His roommates
His family
Nobody knew where he was.
It was terrifying.
I was terrified.
Winter
She was.

Stephen
Apparently.
It was a big deal.

Daphne
Apparently?

Stephen
But, yeah
I had to spend time in uh
Psychiatric care
After that.
Three weeks
Or whatever.
And I feel good now.
It feels like a long time
Almost a lifetime
It’s been a long time since then
It’s nothing
Really
Really
You guys don’t have to

Nate
So that wasn’t-

Stephen
I always cry at weddings.
Really.
Always.

Clara enters.
With a raised, half-empty glass.

Clara \textit{(Sing-song, a toast and a roast)}
Bill and Stephanie
Stephanie and Bill \hspace{1cm} (Nate)
Kissy kissy kissy \hspace{1cm} (Ohh boy.)
On a
Hill
Married together
Forever more
Three kids and a beach house
On the shore
Thirty-year mortgage
Nine-to-five jobs
Imported cars
In their parking garage.
What could end
This bliss?
Death
Kidnapping
Or a younger mistress.

She bows.
Pause.

We used to sing that
All the time.
Every day
Remember that?

Pause.

What?

Nate
Nothing.

Clara
What??

Nate
Nothing..

Winter
I remember it

Daphne
I can’t believe we

Clara
I tried to get it going tonight

Nate
We heard.
Everyone heard.
Daphne  
And then

Stephen  
You tripped

Winter  
That poor waiter

Nate  
His poor shirt

Clara  
You should never wear anything to a wedding  
You’re afraid will  
Get stained.

Daphne  
In any case

Stephen  
Boom!  
Ruckus  
Pandemonium  
People yelling  
Taking pictures  
Applauding  
The whole event ground to a halt  
So people could see who was causing trouble.

Nate  
And  
You were too busy laughing  
And bowing  
And waving  
To keep on singing.

Which was good.  
And then I brought you upstairs  
And put you in your PJs  
And poured you a glass of water  
So you could drink it  
And then sleep.

Clara  
But I’m not tired.
I don’t want to go to sleep.

**Daphne**
Bill’s mother was *not* happy.
Poor Susie.

**Winter (to Daphne)**
You were drunk.

**Clara**
We were all drunk.

**Nate**
You were pretty drunk,
Hon.

**Winter**
You were like
So drunk.

**Daphne**
So drunk
The most
Like,

*Clara glares.*

So so so so
Sosososoososoosoooo
Drunk.

**Daphne laughs at herself.**

**Clara**
You’re drunk.

**Daphne**
Huh what?

**Stephen (at the bar)**
We’re all fucking drunk.
It’s 4 in the morning
Our friends just got married
With an open fucking bar
Of course we’re all drunk
We drank
We’re drunk
It is what it is.

**Nate**
I can’t get over
Stephanie and Bill
The way they were
Here
After the ceremony?
Together

**Clara (singing)**
Bill and Stephanie
Stephanie and Bill

**Nate**
I’m SAYING
They were like
Acting like-
Bill doesn’t dance
But he was dancing
Steph doesn’t sing
But she killed karaoke.
Where did that come from?

**Daphne**
Their love?
For each other?

**Nate**
Nonononono.
That’s not love
That’s adrenaline.
That
Watching that
Watching them
Made me feel so
I looked around
During the ceremony…
Everyone was crying.
All these people
Crying
Weeping.

And it’s like…
You don’t understand
That

(to Clara)
I miss falling in love
Going on dates
Trying to impress each other
Bragging to my friends about you
About myself with you.
Keeping secrets
From you
(Feet trash tv farts phobias plans).
Keeping us a secret
From the office?

Clara
This is how he talks to me
About me
To my face.

Nate
You don’t feel the same?

Clara
I love
How we’ve changed.
You used to not know how to cook,
Now you make dinner.
You used to sleep in,
Now you’re up before I am
Reading the newspaper
Running
Fantasy football whatever.

Nate
Yes.
And you’re still sleeping in.

I don’t know why I’m the only one who has to work
These days
On myself
On us.
It’s fucked up.

Clara
You’re not
Nate
I am, I am
I fucking am.
Who tackled a waiter tonight
And who carried who upstairs to our hotel room?

Clara
I tripped

Nate
Which one of us came downstairs
And dealt with his sister’s friend
 Fucking crying
 For no reason
 And which one of us came down
 To sing a fucking SONG
 We MADE UP
 When we LIVED IN GODDAMN BROOKLYN.
 We are supposed to be adults
 Getting older
 Aging
 And you’re just
 Drunk.

Stephen
We’re all drunk.

Silence.

Nate is the only one standing.
He’s riled up,
Pacing, maybe,
Or doing something with his hands
Like he can’t let them be still
But can’t release his frustration
Either.

He looks around at all of them.
For a moment,
Combativeness,
Then,
Relaxation.
An exhale.

Winter
I wonder if we’re keeping anyone up.
Clara
Oh
I don’t care.

Daphne
The people

Clara
If they’re actually tired, they’ll sleep.

Nate
There’s nowhere else to go.
The place is
Alright
But it’s the middle of nowhere

Stephen
It’s her hometown!

Nate
That doesn’t mean it’s not
Nowhere.

Stephen
Look.
Let’s go look.
We’ll see
We can see.
There are things,
Right?
Come on.

Nate
You’re–

Daphne’s catches Nate’s eye,
And he stops short.
He sighs.

Fine, fine.

Stephen grabs Nate and they run outside.

Clara
People should stay up late.
It’s a wedding!
What do you think people do after weddings?
It’s not just the bride and groom.

**Daphne**
I know

**Clara**
And in a hotel…

*Pause.*
What?
What else is there to talk about?

**Daphne**
I don’t know.

**Winter**
What about you and Nate?
Where did you
Meet?

**Clara**
I don’t remember.

**Daphne**
Work.

**Clara**
Oh, right.
Work.

**Winter**
That’s nice.
We met at a gallery.
At an opening.
Friends of friends’ show
Even in a place as big as
New York Chicago Paris LA Berlin Tokyo
It still feels like a small scene
Small world
Everyone knows everyone
Pretty much.

**Daphne**
It wasn’t until we hung out
Alone
That we realized

**Winter**
That we knew

**Daphne**
That we like…
That we got along.

*She looks at Clara, excited.*
*Clara clearly isn’t interested.*

*An awkward pause.*

**Daphne (changing the subject)**
What was that music?
That they were playing?

**Clara**
Disco?

**Daphne**
Is that what it was?

**Winter**
No-

**Daphne**
It was
Crappy but good.
You could really dance to it.
And we were dancing
Oh!
You’re a good dancer!
You’re really good.
You were like

*Daphne imitates Winter dancing*
*She tries to get Winter to join in.*
*Winter doesn’t.*

**Daphne (cont’d)**
Come on!

*Nate and Stephen reenter*
*They are soaking wet.*
Nate more than Stephen,
Who’d used his jacket as an umbrella.

Nate
What a crappy night.

Stephen
It’s really raining.

Daphne (still dancing)
Mhm.

Clara
Look at you.

Nate
Holy fucking shit
It’s so fucking wet

Clara
At least it waited until everyone was inside.

Nate
Yeah, well
I was right
There’s nothing out there.

Stephen
A little rain never hurt anyone!

Winter
Is it that bad?

Clara
It’s fine, you’re fine.
He’s fine.

Nate
I need a towel.

(Into the hall)
Towel!

Clara
Jesus.
Winter
Here.

Winter gets some rags from behind the bar.
The men dry off with them
As best they can.

They hear footsteps upstairs,
And all look up,
Or out towards the lobby.
Like kids who are caught somewhere they’re not supposed to be,
Because
They don’t know if they’re supposed to be there
Or not.

Nate
We did see some lights on upstairs.

Everyone waits, nervously, for another moment.
Nobody comes in.
They relax into a long silence.

People get drinks,
And settle in,
Now lounging on the floor
Or on tables
Or the bar.

The ballroom that was so unfamiliar to them at the beginning of the night,
Now feels almost theirs.

They listen to the rain for a while.

Clara
You know what they say about rain on your wedding day.

Winter
I don’t.
Do you?

Daphne
No.

Nate
It’s their wedding night
Now
Not day.
So it doesn’t matter.

Clara (not caring)
It’s supposed to be bad luck, isn’t it?
Right?

Winter
I’ve never heard that.

Daphne
Makes sense.

Clara
Like, there’s the song.

Winter
What song?

Clara (tentatively misquoting Funny Girl)
Don’t rain on my wedding…?

Daphne
Oh shit!

Nate
Shit, fuck yeah!

Clara
You know the song?

Daphne
We know that song.

Nate
Babs.

Daphne
We love that song.

Nate
Baaababs.

Daphne
But it’s
Daphne and Nate set themselves up
To impersonate Barbara Streisand,
In a way that makes it clear
This isn’t the first time they’re doing this:

Daphne (cont’d)
NOBODY NO NOBODY
IS GONNA
RAIN ON MYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY

Daphne & Nate
PAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAADE!

They stand there,
Panting,
For a sec.

A stunned silence.

Clara
So you know the song.

Daphne
Of course we know it.
But it’s about a parade,
Not a wedding.
And I think it’s more of a metaphor?
Like an extended metaphor
Not, like
A superstition.

Stephen
Rain,
On your wedding day
It’s actually a good thing.

Winter (looking on her phone)
Here it just says “tears.”

Clara, Daphne, and Nate clump around Winter’s phone.

Stephen
Uh, it-

Clara
It does.
Huh.

**Nate**
I can see that.

**Daphne**
I can totally, totally see that.

**Stephen (who nobody is listening to)**
Actually,
It’s supposed to symbolize,
Uh,
Fertility,
Bounty,
Unity, uh,
Washing away your past and starting fresh
...
Et cetera.
Traditionally.
I think a lot of people just don’t like rain, so they think
They say that
It’s God crying
Or some bullshit like that
To get other people to think it’s bad luck

**Daphne (reading from phone)**
Other things that are supposed to symbolize tears at weddings:
Pearls
And almonds
Onion soup
Peonies
Yellow roses.
Those are all bad luck.
So is seeing a nun
Or a monk
Or a pregnant woman
Or dropping your ring
Or wearing your dress beforehand
Or making your own wedding dress
Oh, oh, oh!
But here
**Here**
It says that crying is actually good luck.
If the bride cries
It means she’s shed all her tears
Before the marriage
And the marriage itself will be happy
And tearless.

**Winter** *(to Daphne, genuinely)*
I love you.

**Daphne**
I love you.

**Clara** *(to Nate)*
I love you.

_Nate moves to the bar_
_He gives this speech from behind it,_
_Like a gregarious bartender,_
_Entertaining his late-night regulars._

Partway through, he discovers an unopened bottle of champagne.

**Nate**
Back when Bill and Steph met
And when we met them
I didn’t think they’d stick it out
But,
Here we are
At their wedding,
Let’s drink to that.

*(to Clara)*
They were our neighbors,
Back in that
(God)
That building in Brooklyn?
That apartment—
Slanted floors grubby windows smelly carpet.
We’d run into them
In the street
And talk about how we were all going to move
Out of there.

**Clara**
I loved Brooklyn.

_Nate opens the bottle._
Nate
My point is
They were fighting constantly
Back then.
And now
They’re making the whole thing legally binding,
Till death do they part.
Isn’t that something?
Can you believe people still do that?

Clara
You did it.
You’re married.
To me.

Nate
And now we’re the ones fighting.

Clara
What?
And that’s my fault?

Nate
No, I

Clara
I wanted to get married to you
Because I love you
And I did
And I do.
But I loved where we lived, too
That apartment-

She shakes her head.

I can’t start talking about it,
I’ll get too angry.

Stephen (looking at the wedding cake)
It is a big commitment.

Clara
Yeah, of course it is, but (to Nate) you don’t have to-

Daphne
So intense about it...
Winter
Life or death.

Stephen
Way, way too intense.

Nate is too busy handing out the champagne
To notice
Or care.

A pause:
People sip their drinks.
Everyone is tired.

Daphne
But it is a super intense thing…
Like
Have you ever been cliff jumping?
Nate and I when we would go up North growing up,
There were these cliffs you’d jump off of
Nothing crazy, like 20 feet
And you’d, you’d
You’d be standing there
At the edge
And you knew you could do it,
Because your friend did it
But you’d still have to, you know, say in your head,
One two
Three.
And on three you’d jump,
And you’d fall down,
And there was always just enough time
When you were in the air
Before you hit the water
That you could really feel that
Like, you were so aware of
You’re falling
And then SMACK the water hits your feet
And it stings and you swim up as fast as you can
Because you go so deep
And you gasp for air
And everyone cheers
And it’s all ok
And good
And when you think back on it,
It was all really fun and worth it,
But when you’re up there waiting…

_Silence, for a moment._
_Then Stephen speaks into the silence._

**Stephen**
I met
The happiest couple that I’ve ever met
When I left–
When I was in
Vermont.
They were so happy
I wanted to
Uh, like,
Punch them in the face?
You know?

_Pause._

**Daphne**
No.

**Stephen**
Yeah
So this couple
In line for coffee one morning
After I’d been there for a couple of days.
They had on those big hiking backpacks,
Bandanas,
Rain jackets,
Boots,
You know,
Gear.

Tall guy, tiny lady,
Beard sunglasses smile
Rosy cheeks blue eyes
Loud voices.

This old guy
That they’d met online somehow
Took us to his farm
About a half an hour out of town,
Yeah.

When we got to the farm, the old guy led the three of us to the guest bedroom.
“There’s only one bed,” he said to us, like,
We were gong to have to fight for it
The tall guy had already laid down on it, over the covers, kicking off his boots.
“No problem partner,” he told the guy, “no problem at all.”
I wound up sleeping on the floor.

We ate dinner that night with the old guy
And his family.
All of their kids hated school
And whined about it
So much
All night.

We worked there next few days
Fixing things, feeding the animals,
Simple stuff.
The couple
They liked moving things around,
A lot
Collecting piles of plywood
Then moving them
15 feet further down the grass
To where I was fixing this huge fence.
Then another 15 feet
And another
And another
Talking the whole time
About
People places dog breeds food air fares hiking boots vistas.

Eventually, they told me they were moving on.
I decided to stay.
I kept on working
Mending the same fence
Until
Until it was all mended.

Pause.

Clara
Did they have rings?

Stephen
I don’t remember
Clara
You have to check!

Daphne
They probably weren’t even married

Nate
Doesn’t sound like it.

Winter
They could just be traveling together
Like
Platonically.
People do that all the time.

Stephen
They were definitely together.

Clara
How do you know?
Are you sure?

Nate
No wait
They didn’t
They didn’t like
Do
It
Or anything
When you were
I mean
Sleeping
On the floor
Next to them
Or anything?

Stephen
Yep.
Everyone groans.

Winter
Doesn’t mean they were married
Or dating
It just means
Nate
That is rough.

Stephen
It really-

Daphne
Yeah that is pretty rough.

Nate
What about the people who lived above us
Clara?
So many parties.
In Brooklyn?
And it was like
Close the gym
Am I right?

Clara
I thought we weren’t talking about

Nate
It just reminded me
Because we could hear them
You know
Too.
So

Clara
Yes but that’s not what we’re

Nate
I know but

Daphne
Nate-

Winter
Let them-

Stephen
Guys-

Nate
I don’t understand why
You care about
That apartment.
We left it.
We’re past it, and
We’re married now
We’re old.
That’s who we are.
And what, living like college kids
In some hobo first apartment
Would change that?
Having three jobs, scraping by?
I want a career
I want stability
I want a family.
We’re supposed to be working towards all that
Together.
We’re getting older
Growing old
Together.
That’s the choice we made.

Clara
I wake up every day
*We* wake up
And we make the choice
The active choice
To keep this thing
Our marriage
Our *love*
Going.
It’s not something we did
And are stuck with.
We get older,
We change,
We improve ourselves,
We make sacrifices,
But…

Yes, there were cockroaches in that apartment
Sometimes
Yes, the floor was slanted
But only in the kitchen!
Its little porch
Our neighbor’s basil, mint, and thyme in their window box
The way they smelled when you unlocked the front door
That friendly fat cat
And old, quiet dog
That would lay out near the door in the summer.
Whose were those?
The single-digit apartment numbers
The old lady landlord who could never pronounce my name.
*Cl-air-uh, Cl-air-uh, Cl-air-uh,* she said.
And I’d say, “It’s Cl-are-uh, actually?”
And she’d say, “Sorry Cl-air-uh!”
The park just around the corner from our house
Strollers mommy-bloggers overpaid babysitters.
All you remember is the dirt.
Then where did we move?
Why?

**Nate**

We

**Clara (getting angry now)**

Because when we left work
We’d get on the opposite platform
As the people we worked with?
Because you’d see them,
Over there
Ties loose
Chatting
Laughing
Connecting
And you wanted to be a part of that?
Because,
Eventually,
You had it with those long train rides
Across town
To see your friends on weekends.
You’d never take a book
Or headphones
You’d sit there
Next to me
Staring
Staring
Staring at the stops left before we got home.
And even though I was happy
With where we were
We moved
To a glass building
Iron and glass and granite and keyless doors
Sleepy doormen
Barking dogs
Trash on the street
For what?
So you’re in the right neighborhood?
Silence.

You can’t tell me that I don’t do this
For love
Because
If I didn’t love you I’d have stayed in Brooklyn.
Where I can breathe.

A long silence.
Nobody relaxes.

Winter
Well you can hardly blame them.

Stephen
For

Winter
For thinking the poor guy was asleep and doing it
In a bed
Right next to him.

Nate
Oh god.

Winter
What?
They can’t
Want each other like
That?

Pause.

Stephen
I got used to it,
Really.

Nate
No
Yeah
They can
Winter
Daphne and I
When we first met
Well,
When we first started going out
All we would do was have sex.
Every time we hung out.
Nighttime
Daytime
Around other people
It didn’t matter.
We’d fuck.
We’d go to a gallery opening,
Talk about it,
See friends,
Eat some cheese and crackers,
Go home,
And fuck.
Go to a reading,
Mingle, talk literature,
Go home,
And fuck.
Go to a movie,
And fuck.
Go out to dinner,
Get ice cream,
Have a nightcap,
And fuck.
It got to the point
Where
Every night
For a stretch, a long stretch
Too long
We’d be at each other’s houses
Until two, three, four, five, six,
Seven in the morning.
Sleeping, not sleeping,
 Fucking, not fucking,
Watching TV,
Listening to music,
Ignoring the TV,
Ignoring the music,
And fucking.

Pause;
Winter remembers.
Daphne
How is that supposed to make him feel any better?

Winter
I don’t know.
I just thought

Daphne
Well now everyone knows how much we
Fucking fucked
Right?
So…

Clara
I liked it.

Winter
I didn’t even talk about the

Stephen
Hey.
Hey.

I’m just wondering
Why does everybody feel like they need to give me advice?
Just because, you know
You’re all married.

Nate
What? No.

Winter
Stephen…

Daphne
We’re not married

Winter
Absolutely not

Daphne
Absolutely not?

Winter
Well,
Nate
Yes?

Clara
Nate.

Daphne
Well, don’t you think that
I mean we might
One day
You don’t think about that?

Winter
Are you asking

Daphne
No!

Winter
No?

Daphne
No, I mean-
Yes I mean no
Like
You know
I’m just thinking about it.

Winter
We don’t have to talk about this now.

Daphne
I want to,
Though.

Winter
I mean
I don’t know
If I believe in it
In that way?

Daphne
What

Winter
Like,
Why do you need to be so
Make such a big deal out of
What’s our little thing

**Daphne**
Little?

**Winter**
I didn’t-

**Nate**
No one is going to deny
My baby sister
The wedding she’s been dreaming about.

No one is going to keep me
From giving the toast
I’ve been working on
Every evening commute
Since I got married
So that
The time comes
When I get to transfer this note
To Microsoft word
And print it out
To put into the breast pocket
Of a rented tux
And read it.
In front of everyone we’ve ever known and loved throughout our entire lives
On the biggest most important special spiritual day
Of my sister’s life.
You can’t deny me that.

**Clara**
So that’s what you were doing
On the train
That’s what you were thinking about
That whole time
When we were
When I was standing next to you
In a crowded
No room to breathe,
To think
To put my headphones in
And you’d be there, next to me
Falling over at every stop and start
Grabbing onto my arm to stay on your feet
Staring at your phone
Staring at the stops left
At the ads
And I’d ask what you were thinking about
Or how your day was
Or where we should have dinner
And you’d say
Nothing fine anywhere I’m not that hungry.
That’s what you were doing
Instead of
Looking at
Being with
Me?

Pause.

Nate
Yes.

Clara
Ugh.

Winter
Well, I’m not

Daphne
It’s fine

Stephen
It’s not about you,
Dude.

Winter
He’s right.

Stephen
It’s about them
And their
Love
Or whatever.

Nate
Who are weddings for
If not the families?
You
You suffer through it
You…
Standing up there in something itchy.
Do you think Bill and Stephanie like string quartets?
Do you think they danced their first dance
To their favorite song?
A song that will remind them
Of each other
Every time they hear its opening note?
No.
They’re going to hear that song
In a few months
At another wedding
And one will turn to the other
And say
“Didn’t this play at our wedding?”
And the answer will be yes
Because it was Grandma’s favorite
And she insisted on it.

Clara
What about our wedding?
You didn’t think about me?
I was thinking about you
About us, our future
The whole time.
I’m serious
It didn’t matter how uncomfortable
How boring
How the wax burned my hand when we lit the candle together
How your mother talked to you more than I did at dinner
Your sister’s crappy music taste
Those goddamn cigars.
None of that got in the way of
It couldn’t ruin what was still
Our
Our day
To me.
Our one day
Our beginning.

Winter
A wedding is a wedding,
Is a wedding,
Is a wedding.
No matter how you do it.
There are steampunk weddings
Bathtub weddings
Space-themed weddings,
Underwater weddings,
Televised weddings,
Unplugged weddings,
Shotgun weddings,
Mass weddings,
Intimate weddings,
Reality TV weddings,
Spiteful weddings,
Young people weddings,
Old people weddings,
Country club weddings,
Second weddings,
Third weddings,
Fourth weddings,
Triumphant weddings…
It’s the same
If you say your vows in gibberish
Or Latin.

Clara
But
I saw you
Crying during the ceremony.
And you
And you
And…

Clara can’t call out Nate,
Because she can’t find him.
They all look around for him.

He’s snuck back into a corner
Where the cake is,
And is slicing it.
Quietly.

They notice him, there,
And watch him
Cut the cake.

There is some silence.
And then some more.
He only starts talking when he realizes that everyone’s looking at him.
Nate
I don’t want to say that we got married when we were Too Young naive passionate physical idealistic But… There’s nothing wrong with getting married young Is what we told ourselves And it’s true For some people But for us… We made this promise to each other Our old selves made this promise to each other And now Neither of us are those people. That doesn’t mean we don’t Or didn’t Or do Love. But…

And I’m not saying that we should (Ugh) (Divorce) Or you know Anything like that But I’m saying that things change and we Struggle Are struggling to Keeping up with those changes, Aren’t we?

Yes, we’re trying And we’re going to keep on trying. And it will be ok It will be Alright.

There is some silence after this.

Can someone help me out with this cake?

Winter
Gluten-free.

Daphne
A small slice
For me
Very small.
I have nightmares if I eat before bed.

Winter
Really?

Daphne
Oh shut up.
*Clara, Daphne, and Stephen go to the cake,*
*And collect some*
*From Nate.*

A long silence.

Stephen
When I got back to New York
By the time I got on the train back
From Vermont
My phone was dead,
My clothes were dirty,
And I was dead tired.
I got back to my apartment around 2am.
My roommates were asleep.

I’d been gone for about a week and a half.

When I went into work the next day, there was someone else
There.
Sitting at my little desk.
When they asked who I was, I just left.

When I got home
I looked at Facebook for the first time in two weeks
And I just had this moment
Like
My friends
My world
Had carried on without me.

It felt like
Being gone
Those nights sleeping on the floor in Vermont–
That was my real life.
Like where I was
In the city,
Surrounded by people,
Noise
Chaos
That was where I was running away to,
Not the other way around.

I’m here
With you all
Who are
You know
Together
And I’m
You know…

Clara
It’s nothing like that.

Stephen
It is! It is.
Isn’t it?
It totally is.
It’s exactly that.

Winter
Stephen, calm down.

Nate
Stephen, buddy.

Daphne
I don’t want to say that I’m worried about you
In a way that would be
Condescending
Or anything.
But…

Winter
We all seem to be growing up, getting older.

Nate
With each other

Winter
With other people, yeah, and
Nate
Now we’re starting to think that
That

Clara
Where’s that person for you, right?
Like

Nate
We want this thing for you
Not because we think you need it
No, no it’s not that
At all.

Winter
We’re just a part of these
Things
That, yeah, are hard
But they keep us going

Daphne
It keeps me going.

Nate
They keep us going.

Clara
Right.

Daphne
And we want that, for you,
Right?
We all do, I think.

Pause.

Stephen
Great.

Silence.

Winter
Do you know that feeling of
Your neck is tight
Your arms are tired
And you think
I just need a massage
Or something
And you rub your own neck
And roll your shoulders
Or take a hot shower
But the knots stay.
Your shoulders don’t relax.
You’re not
Relaxed.
You need someone else
That
You can call when you’re walking home
For no reason.
Someone you have dinner with
Every night
Unless you make other plans
And if you were to eat without them
Or vice versa
It would be strange.
It might not even feel like dinner.

Nate *(to Stephen)*
Hey
How about I introduce you-

Stephen
No

Daphne
What if

Stephen
No

Nate
Someone from

Stephen
No

Clara
I know this

Stephen
No
Daphne
Why don’t you call

Stephen
Really

Daphne
Or I can email

Stephen
Thanks but

Nate
Makes great salmon

Stephen
I appreciate

Nate
Steak?

Stephen
Guys
Guys guys guys
Guys
Guys
Guys guys
Guys.

I’m fine.

Pause.

It’s fine
It’s totally totally totally...
Fine.
I’m fine.

Pause.

Winter
We talk about marriage
But we never talk about why we think it’s Necessary.
When we talk about it
We really just mean
Like
Adult life.
Why legally codify something
A relationship
That’s so personal
And so organic?

Daphne
I don’t know.

Clara
Because it’s what we need
To be secure.
Right?
To be sure that it won’t disappear
Poof
Like that.

To be held,
Beholden
Legally
To another person
Should totally be intimidating and scary and institutional
But that shouldn’t stop
That shouldn’t keep us
From actually caring
From really trying
Nurturing what we-

Winter
I mean,
Other animals don’t have
Weddings
Do they?

Daphne
I wish they did.
Imagine that
Imagine that.

Nate
I am.

Winter
But there are
Monogamous species
Beavers
Albatrosses
Penguins
Macaws
Vultures
Barn Owls
Turtle Doves
Wolves
Swans
Just to name a few,
But did you know
In the five thousand different kinds of mammals
Only
Three
To five
Per-cent
Mate for life?

Daphne
Which makes us the exception to the rule.

Winter
If we are
In fact
Exceptions to the rule.
Who really knows?

Nate
They haven’t figured that out.

Winter
Science isn’t perfect.
Nobody can predict the weather
Perfectly
It’s all just guesswork.

Daphne
But
There’s NOAA Weather Radio
And
Radar
And everything.

Winter
Educated guesswork.
Silence.
Nobody has anything to say.
Droopy eyes yawns heavy limbs thoughts of sleep.

Clara
It’s late.

Nate
Yeah.

Clara
I can’t figure out what anyone’s talking about
Anymore.

Nate
Yeah.

Clara
Let’s go to bed.

Nate
Yeah.
Oh!
No.
Wait
Waitwaitwaitwaitwaitwaitwait
Wait.

Nate runs behind the bar,
And finds an aux cord
For his phone.
He plugs it in, and it makes that horrible crunching sound in the speakers.
He plays a wedding song.
That he and Clara danced to
At their wedding,
And comes out from behind the bar.

Clara
Oh.
What is
?

Nate
Can we
Do you want to
One more
A last
Dance
Before bed?

Clara
Oh.
Yes.

The song starts.
He puts his arms around her.
She leans into him.
The rest of them watch.

Is this from…?

Nate
No.

Clara
Oh.
It sounds like

Nate
I know.

They dance, the two of them.

Then, Winter and Daphne dance, too,
Close by,
Once Nate and Clara have forgotten
They’re not alone
In the room.

Stephen does a little twirly thing
By himself:
A solo.
Before fixing himself a drink
And settling down.

The couples move across the stage,
Sometimes in sync,
Sometimes on totally, completely, different wavelengths.

Nate and Clara stop dancing before the song is over,
And wave goodbye to Stephen,
And skirt around Winter and Daphne,
Who are still dancing,
On their way out.

By the time the song fades out,
Winter and Daphne sit together
Holding each other
Far away (across the stage) from Stephen.

Daphne
Do you think I could
Guess the weather?
Correctly?
Like exactly exactly right?

Winter
How would you-

Daphne
I don’t know.
Send a balloon into space
With a little camera.
Or just guess
Something
I want to guess something right.
Nothing terrible
Just like
A tornado in Oklahoma
Or a thunderstorm in Oregon
Or a cold snap in Minnesota
Something common
But uncommon enough
That it’s still special.

Winter
I have no idea what you’re talking about.

Daphne
I love the Weather Channel
All those awkward people
Don’t you?
You don’t
Don’t you.

Winter
I like listening to music
Podcasts
Things that people made.
Art,
Not

**Daphne**
But but but
They’re sweeties!

**Winter**
You don’t like
*Watch* them
You just put it on.

**Daphne**
Do you remember
The stars
When we went for
A walk
Last summer?

**Winter**
When?

**Daphne**
When we went
Up North,
Ya dingus.

**Winter**
Oh, oh yeah.
*That* walk.

**Daphne**
There were so many
And the Milky Way
Up there too.
You never see that in the city.
Only in the middle of nowhere.

**Winter**
Can we go back soon?

**Daphne**
If I can get vacation days
Winter
And if your parents let you use the cabin after

Daphne
The stain came out!
The stain came out
She thinks she can still see it but
The stain came out.

Winter
I know
I know
I know
I know
I know
I know.

They fall asleep
Accidentally
Together.

If there are windows in this ballroom
We can see the first light of the morning.
If there aren’t,
Stephen looks at his watch.

Stephen
Good morning.

Silence.
Then, with a smile:

Good mornin’,
Good mornin’,
We’ve talked the whole night through.

Good mornin’,
Good mornin’,
To you…

Do you ever wake up
Too early?
And since you can’t fall back asleep
You walk out
You go outside
Down your block
And everything is closed
And no one is around
And it’s terrifying.
Because if you go out late
Like late at night
There are still things happening,
Really really late into the night,
But early in the morning, it’s…
Stillness
Silence
Sleep.

_He looks to the audience for a response._

Me neither.

That morning
When I ran away
When I left New York
It had been another week of plans falling through.
People forgetting to meet up
Or follow up
Or getting lazy
At the last minute
Refusing take the subway to meet me
Refusing to go to the restaurant
Where I was
Because we’d made reservations
There
Yesterday.

That morning
I woke up early
(Which I usually don’t do)
I woke up so early
That
It felt completely dark outside.
I went to the kitchen
To make coffee
An entire pot
For me and my roommates
The three of us.

I looked outside our kitchen window.
The sun was just beginning
The sky was getting brighter
Like it is right now.
The city was still.
The city is never still.
I closed my eyes for a second
I tried to take a snapshot of that stillness
The darkness
The morning light.
I was concentrating so hard.

And then
A car drove by
A dog barked
And I opened my eyes.

There was a lady walking her dog,
On the street below the window.
It was sniffing the trashcan below my building
For a few minutes
Before she started yelling at it.
TAKE A PISS
TAKE A PISS
PISS PISS PISS
PIIIIIIISS.

The dog looked up at her with this look, like,
“There should be nothing that stops you from sniffing wherever you want, for as long as you want, as long as what you’re sniffing is fascinating and satisfying to you, why can’t you understand that?”

That’s when I knew
I had to leave.

*Stephen stands up,*
*And moves*
*Closer to the couple onstage,*
*Carrying his glass along with him.*

There’s this diner in Rutland
Where I ate
The waitress asked what I was doing there
Like
She knew
That I was gone
That I had left somewhere.
I told her that I had to get out of New York.
She nodded.
“Too many people down there,” she said.
“That’ll fuck you up.”
I asked her where she was from,
She said Staten Island.

Isn’t that funny?
I asked her why she moved to Vermont
And she said ‘for school’
And when I asked why Rutland
She just said
“Husband.”
Not in a resentful way.
With a shrug:
Just,
“Husband.”

A long pause.
Maybe he refills his glass.

I’m not scared of being by myself
I like being alone
I like
Reading.
But being alone forever…

I was the kid who was afraid of roller coasters.
Who would hold my friends backpacks
While they waited in line
And went on the ride
And I’d watch
And breathe in the theme park fumes
And sweat through my shirt
And count how much cash I had left
For the midway
And make sure that my car keys were still in my pocket
And look next to me on the bench
There are always waiting benches
At the mothers
And babysitters
Who were there
Watching the kids on the ride
With me.
They’d be reading
Or knitting,
Sometimes.
But mostly they just watched
They just sat there
In their comfortable pants
And watched the ride
Looking for their kids
Following their progress
So they could stand up
So they could be ready
Right when the kid came wobbling out of the gate
Smiling green-faced windswept amped up thrilled
To go to the next ride.

I think about that
Sometimes
And I worry I’m still watching the ride
Instead of getting on.

Silence.

*He clangs a fork against his glass*
*Which shatters the silence,*
*Ceremonially.*
*(Ding-ding-ding-ding-ding).*

*At this point, he is downstage of Daphne and Winter,*
*In his own light,*
*In his own focus,*
*For the first time,*
*Really.*

You don’t need to impress each other
To have a good marriage.
You don’t need to be codependent
Or, even, exclusive
Sexually, romantically
To have a good marriage
Or relationship
Or whatever it is
For the two three four five of you….
You don’t have to like the same rides
Or restaurants
To have a good marriage.
You don’t need the same friends
You don’t need a dog
You don’t need a bidet
You don’t need to laugh at each other’s jokes.
You don’t need to show your love in the same way
Or need to be loved in the same way
To have a good marriage
You don’t need to stay married
To have a good marriage.

There are so many things you don’t need
Because
You have each other.

Pause.

Stephen opens his mouth,
Closes it,
And raises his glass.

To Bill and Stephanie.

End of Play.
The Dramaturgy of Listening: Understanding Theatrical Aurality Through Annie Baker’s Plays

“What does it mean for a being to be immersed entirely in listening, formed by listening or in listening, listening with all its being?” -Jean-Luc Nancy

Introduction

There is an immense number of similarities between the simple, everyday act of listening and attending a performance. For instance, performance is a mode of communication that is simultaneously produced and consumed, and its existence is dependent on the existence of a consumer. That is, without an audience there is no performance just as without a listener, speech is just noise. At a performance, the audience is given the task to listen. This means hearing the piece, but also watching it and feeling the emotional and physical state of the room around them; to listen, in this context, is also to experience. In this essay, I will investigate the inherent aural aspect of the experience of attending and interpreting performance, and specifically, the playwright’s role in creating the aural mode in which their plays operate. This analysis will also discuss listening as it pertains to the dramaturgical content of theater: what playwrights are giving attention to on stage. Annie Baker, whose work I will focus on, puts listening at the forefront of her plays, in both her craft and her content.

Annie Baker uses pauses and silences in her plays a lot—so much so that half of her actors’ time on stage could be spent in silence. Her silences constantly situate the audience as listeners and give them the aural space between lines to remember they are sitting in a theater watching a play. Her dialogue is written with a keen ear to the way people talk on day-to-day basis, with ‘um’s, ‘uh’s, and other stumbles
abound. The subjects of her plays are everyday people—not general or ‘everyman’ characters, but people who have overlooked jobs and live in overlooked places—coffee shop boys in rural Vermont, movie theater workers, Gettysburg B&B proprietors, and the like.

This essay is titled “The Dramaturgy of Listening” because it is an investigation of the ways listening is essential to performance, and especially to theater, which tends to be a text-driven mode of performance. Dramaturgy is a formal term for the analysis of plays and performances’ dramatic structures; the structure of the piece itself (plot, character, musicality), and the meta-structures that surround the play as an ephemeral object (historical context, playwright’s history and positionality, the cannon of material the play is responding to/acting within). These are the lenses through which I will explore how listening is vital to performance, and how this vitality is utilized and explored through Baker’s writing. Dramaturgy, then, for the purpose of this essay, is the discipline through which ‘listening’ will be discussed, as I trace where it enters the conceptual conversation surrounding Baker’s work.

Listening is much more difficult to define, and the project of the first section of this essay (Sound & the Voice) will be to shape a definition of listening that will be used throughout the rest of the piece.

So why use Annie Baker’s plays to investigate how listening intersects with playwriting? There is no contemporary playwright whose work feels and sounds more reflective of the way that people converse than Annie Baker. She’s an extremely culturally and critically relevant contemporary playwright—her work includes *The Flick*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2014, she is a resident playwright at
Signature Theater, and is a 2017 MacArthur Fellow. Baker’s work is highly regarded and well-recognized by both critics and producers, and she is currently writing for and supported by non-profit spaces that are dedicated to playwriting as art (i.e. their investment is beyond commercial; it is also artistic). She writes plays incredibly attentive to the way people exist together, radically employing silences and “realistically inarticulate bumbling” rather than heightened, “theatrical” dialogue.\(^2\) Baker’s writing is, itself, an act of listening. Her work is so embedded with and reflective of day-to-day conversation that it is an exercise in listening as much as it is reading, writing, acting, or directing. She asks her audience to be listeners too, by employing theatrical tactics that constantly remind them that they’re at a performance, that they’re bound to be attentive to what’s happening in front of them, and that every word that’s said on stage matters.
Simply put, to listen is to be on the receiving end of aural communication. To attain a more complete understanding of what listening is, it is imperative to understand and investigate sonic objects, especially the voice, which we rely on for the bulk of communication, especially what gets presented in plays. Performance theorists, including Jean-Luc Nancy, Lynne Kendrick, and Ross Brown have only just begun discussing sound and the voice in the past fifteen years or so. Before then, sound in performance was studied as an element of design, similar to the way light influences performances, rather than as an intrinsic part of the mode of performance itself. In this section, I talk about the specific phenomenon or categorization of voice, as it’s the mode of aural communication that theater tends to rely on the most. That said, my analysis of voice could be applied to any sounds that are produced by live bodies with the intent to communicate. Jean-Luc Nancy writes that “Communication is not transmission, but a sharing that becomes subject: sharing as subject of all ‘subjects.’ An unfolding, a dance, a resonance,” meaning that communication as an act that both calls attention to its own existence while also passing on information. It is a vehicle for content and is content at the same time. This becomes incredibly useful when thinking about communication in the context of performance, because performance inherently operates in the same way. Performances are constructed (aesthetic) means to conveying messages. Both the ‘message’ and the ‘performance of the message’ are received and evaluated by the audiences. The ‘subject’ of a performance, then is the performances’ subject, but also the performance itself, or the way the performance conveys its subject.
Similarly, theater is a mode of performance that investigates the material presented on stage, but also the way that we communicate with one another (including theater’s own form and structure). Characters mishearing each other is a classic dramatic tool for both farce and drama. Annie Baker’s plays are a continuation of playwrights’ fascination with the way that people communicate with each other, particularly the way that people talk with one another. Before I get to Baker’s work, and her approach to representing the way people talk and listen, it’s important to look at the tool with which we speak: our voices. “What singles out the voice against the vast ocean of sounds and noises, what defines the voice as special among the infinite array of acoustic phenomena, is its inner relationship with meaning,” Mladen Dolar writes, “The voice is something which points toward meaning, it is as if there is an arrow in it which raises the expectation of meaning, the voice is an opening toward meaning.” Listening, then, is to follow this arrow. Since the voice can only point towards meaning (there are things that are beyond words), listening is as imperfect and interpretive an act as speech. This is where the dramas and farces of the past (Shakespeare and Wilde come to mind immediately) that utilize the listener’s fallibility find their routes of investigation. Baker, on the other hand, focuses her work on the pain and labor it takes to get the simplest sentences and intentions out of one’s mouth, rather than the chaos that happens once they’re already said.

Voice has meaning, only in that it is interpreted to have meaning by the listener. The listener controls what they’ll take away from something, not the speaker. Here is an example from Dolar, about pre-linguistic communication, in particularly a so-called primal scream: “The first scream may be caused by pain, by the need for
food, by frustration and anxiety, but the moment the other hears it, the moment it assumes the place of its addressee, the moment the other is provoked and interpellated by it, the moment it responds to it, scream retroactively turns into appeal, it is interpreted, endowed with meaning, it is transformed into a speech addressed to the other, it assumes the first function of speech: to address the other and elicit an answer.” So while the voice carries meaning, it is also itself meaning—in that when it is heard, the listener extracts meaning without (and beyond) the intention of the person making the noise. This connects back to performance is a vehicle for presenting information, but something that contains information in the performance itself. Performances are dependent on their audiences for meaning in the same way as the voice—whatever meaning a performance seeks to construct must be accepted (and thusly co-created) by its audience. Audiences shape the performances they attend for themselves, their fellow audience members, and even the performers—something I will discuss in further detail later on.

Speaking and listening are both vulnerable acts, according to Dolar, and they are for Annie Baker, too. To speak is to elicit an answer—to get something out of—another person, a paradigm that Annie Baker is fascinated with in her work. Communication, to Baker, always comes with high stakes, because we are always afraid of saying something that will harm ourselves, or the person we’re talking to. Baker chooses to dramatize moments of clunky interpersonal connection—her speakers are always stepping on their own toes, with dialogue that doesn’t flow as much as it dribbles. “We never sound the way we want to sound,” she says in an interview with Adam Greenfield. “We're always stopping ourselves in mid–sentence
because we're so terrified of saying the wrong thing. Speaking is a kind of misery. And I guess I comfort myself by finding the rhythms and accidental poetry in everyone's inadequate attempts to articulate their thoughts." Therein lies the drama and allure of Annie Baker’s writing. She suggests effective and easy communication is, essentially, impossible, but also an unavoidable part of being alive. Her plays (and their success) show that watching people slog their way through it fascinates us. Our attempts are doomed to fail, and yet we have no other choice to keep on trying. She reiterates this in the same interview, saying, “We're all sort of quietly suffering as we go about our days, trying and failing to communicate to other people what we want and what we believe.”

This quiet suffering rears its head over and over in Baker’s plays. Her characters are often trying to forge connections with each other, and they fall short more often than not. Here’s an example from Baker’s *Circle Mirror Transformation* between two people who are in an adult-education acting class together:

THERESA. So what do you think?
SCHULTZ. I ah…?
THERESA. About the class.
SCHULTZ. Huh. Well …

*(He glances nervously towards the door)*
Uh … I like it. I don’t feel … I guess I’m having a little trouble feeling totally comfortable?
THERESA. Yeah.
SCHULTZ. I feel pretty self-conscious.
THERESA. You’ll get the hang of it.
SCHULTZ. You seem so … you’re so good at everything.
THERESA. Well. I’m / actually –
SCHULTZ. You do everything in such a … you’re so graceful.
THERESA. Oh god. That’s …

*(She shakes her head and grins. They look at each other. A long silence.)*
THERESA. Schultz.
SCHULTZ. What.
THERESA. Do you maybe wanna get a cup of coffee after class?
Or um…

(Schultz stands there, speechless. Theresa is confused. After a long pause:)

THERESA. I’m sorry. Did I do something wrong?
SCHULTZ. No.
    I mean yes.
    Didn’t I say yes?
THERESA. You didn’t say anything.
SCHULTZ. Oh god. Yes.
    I’m sorry. I thought I said yes.
    Yes!  

This is the first time that Theresa and Schultz interact one-on-one in the play, and their relationship grows and wilts along with the six-week acting class that *Circle Mirror Transformation* follows. Each character has trouble expressing themselves in this moment, bumbling over the simplest responses to the simplest questions. Schultz even forgets that he didn’t answer Theresa after she finally asks him to get coffee with her. Theresa and Shultz are interested in each other and want to connect, and the hurdle that faces them is the fallibility of their own communication skills. It is Baker’s knack for writing scenes like this that make her plays distinct and that highlight the special attention she pays to the way that people interact.

A deep relationship between ‘voice’ and ‘dramaturgy’ emerges when thinking about Dolar’s conception of the voice as an object that points towards meaning. “The voice in theatre has become so commonly associated with its written material, that which is found in the drama if studied closely enough or enshrined in a script if it is a record of things spoken, that its theatrical purpose has become enmeshed with the various functions of the text,” Lynne Kendrick writes. Kendrick points out the strong
connection between written text and the spoken voice in theater, demonstrating how text shapes the way plays ‘feel.’ Paula Vogel uses the term ‘plasticity’ to describe the playwright’s voice on the page, imbedded in everything that’s “between the lines.” It defines both the texture and feel of the piece, as well as the writer’s intent and conception behind the play. Baker places listening at the center of her work, and illuminates the way that people listen and talk through her dialogue, but also through her plays’ theatricality—installing silences and pauses that do not allow the audience to completely sink into the world of the play. Kendrick complains that text has been distanced from the sonic, yet this so-called distant relationship is central to every scene Baker writes. Baker seems determined to drag it back into the forefront of the audience’s mind and theatrical experience.

Aural communication is elemental and ancient, but also constructed, a paradox that is investigated through theater which takes care to listen. Dolar argues that “[Voice] seems still to maintain the link with nature, on the one hand—the nature of a paradise lost—and on the other hand to transcend language, the cultural and symbolic barriers, in the opposite direction, as it were: it promises an ascent to divinity, an elevation above the empirical, the mediated, the limited, worldly human concerns.” In performance, there is a similar anxiety that plays itself out as the constructed divide between the ‘high’ art and ‘low.’ While each are dependent on the voice as a means of communication, it seems that their directionality is different. Taylor Mac reiterates this this when discussing his piece *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, a day-long musical that explores the United States’ history through pop songs from each decade, all the way back to 1776. Mac says that while classical
music reaches for “the hem of God,” it takes popular music’s imperfection to reach the people. In essence, the differing conception of music from classical to popular are not necessarily in how they are written, but in how they are expected to be received by the people. Voice is essential to the way performance is produced, both practically and conceptually. Understanding voice and performance as ephemeral objects shapes the understanding of listening as an immediate, interpretive act.
I’ve discussed the voice, and its relationship to both theater and listening, and now I’ll discuss the in-the-moment nature of performance, another piece of intellectual connective tissue between voice, listening, and theater. The voice is an ephemeral material object. Sound waves are produced, they reverberate, and eventually they disappear. Their existence is finite. Because of this, audiences are tasked to be in the present moment when they are at performances. Performances only happen once, just as a sentence can only be spoken once (with each repetition its own object, and every recording a representation of the original). Even if a play has a years-long run, and is a well-oiled machine, the audience is different every night, and what they see is a different performance than the night before. Performances and the voice are both nonpermanent objects that only can interact with their audiences (or listeners) at the same time that they are produced. Annie Baker latches onto this in her work, constantly strategically reminding her audience of their position as guests in her theatrical worlds.

This is a trait that the voice– and all sound– has in common with performance as communicative objects. Performance is a nonpermanent event-object as defined by Peggy Phelan, when she wrote, “Performance’s only life is in the present,” and continued to describe that once a performance is documented, “or otherwise participate[s] in the circulation of representations of representations […] it becomes something other than performance.” To reiterate, the voice, which, according to Dolar, “fades away the moment it is produced,” is similar to performance in this way, aligning the role of ‘audience’ and ‘listener’ on the receiving end of these modes.
of communication. Since performances only exist in the present, to analyze performance is to reflect on the memory of the object, rather than the thing itself. This places the present—and presence—at a premium. Often, performances are almost entirely crafted around capturing and holding onto the audience’s attention. Visual and aural spectacle, plots that twist and turn, and humor are all theatrical conventions that, at their core, are meant to re-engage and re-stimulate the audience at a regular pace. This is where Baker’s work is again revolutionary: it dares the audience to engage, coaxing them to the edge of their seats through silences and pauses. When Baker does introduce spectacular elements to her work, they are as understated as her dialogue.

In her play *John*, Baker imposes a mode of theatricality through the play’s transitions. Rather than split the scenes apart with blackouts, Baker tasks Mertis, the old woman who runs the B&B that serves as the setting of the play, to move the hand of the living room’s grandfather clock forward between each scene, dragging the play forward in time as she does so. “If she isn’t the last person onstage, she stealthily creeps onstage between scenes to move time forward,” Baker adds in her pre-dialogue notes in the script.\(^{15}\) While this is perhaps the most overt metatheatrical motif in Annie Baker’s work, each of her plays seem to dramaturgically wink at the audience’s presence. Putting theater games onstage (in *Circle Mirror Transformation*) and having rows of theater seats as a set (in *The Flick*) both nudge audiences to remember that they are at the theater themselves, and that their job as audience members is to be present and to listen. While simultaneously reminding the audience of their situational contract as listeners, Baker ventures to test their patience,
instituting long silences in her plays. This turns the audience’s focus inward, to their own state of listening. She invites her audiences to participate in the piece by giving it their attention, by sticking with her through plays that tend to stretch towards three hours in length.

By attending any performance, the audience actively shapes their own experience, and the experience of others. Laughing, sighing, or even walking out of a theater are all ‘standard’ ways of interacting with a performance, with some more conscious than others. An audience member’s experience is individualized based on what they pay attention to—following one performer, subplot, or theatrical element can define the performance in a way beyond what the performance’s director or actors were intending. This license to focus individually during the act of consuming performance is comes from performance’s demand for attention and engagement on the part of its consumer. Phelan explains, “There are no left-overs, [so] the gazing spectator must try to take everything in. Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility- in a maniacally charged present- and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control.”

The audience has a keen awareness that the performance in front of them is slipping away at the same time that they are taking it in. They take care to give themselves over to the work in front of them, investing their attention with the understanding that whatever they miss is unrecoverable.

Listening, then, for audiences, is the urgent task of being and becoming fully immersed in the performances they see. Jean-Luc Nancy states that “To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me
as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a “self” can take place.” Nancy describes the osculating focus that the listener experiences between themselves and the thing they are experiencing, giving something of themselves to the experience, as well as taking something away, opening themselves up, on multiple levels and on multiple fronts. He also seeks to externalize listening: listening engages not the neck up, but the entire being of the listener. Home-Cook calls this “the phenomenal dynamics of embodied attending” is a kind of full-body, experiential theory of listening Home-Cook investigates. This presents itself in Baker’s work, again through the silence and quiet. Baker takes her audiences through silences, the pauses are both familiar and uncomfortable to experience, as we are used to them from our day-to-day lives, yet so unfamiliar with them on stage. We endure them because Baker, through her writing, is able to get her audience invested in her plays, her characters, and the tiny arcs of daily drama that nevertheless carry an immense amount of weight. The audience also understands that the performance that they are attending is only temporary—they will get up, they will go home, and continue on with their lives unlocked from the silence that Baker imposes.

Performance is perhaps the quintessential example of ephemeral experience. There is an understanding among everyone who participates in a performance that performance will only last so long, and that, when it is over, the relationship between the performer(s) and their audience and the audience’s relationship with each other will dissolve. Jose Muñoz defines the ephemera as “firmly anchored within the social.
Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived.” An ephemeral experience, much like Peggy Phelan’s definition of performance, seems to be just as defined by what it leaves behind than what it produces. Just as sound waves fade away into memory, performances come to an end, only to be relived as representations of themselves, one friend telling another about the play they saw and how it was good, although perhaps a little slow.
Silence & Quiet

Hearing text is the cornerstone of consuming modern drama. Plays are taught in performance, but also as pieces of text, with entire courses focused on reading and analyzing significant plays from the past. Moments in plays that are punctuated without text are unusual, because silence on stage is a break from the expected social relationship between performers and their audiences. Yet, Annie Baker’s plays use silence as a theatrical mode almost as much as dialogue. This adds to the naturalistic feel to Baker’s work—people are not constantly conversing in real life. The amount of silence Baker prescribes for her plays also works theatrically to not allow the audience to necessarily get swept away by what is happening, but to instead emotionally invest in the play through (or even despite) its spare dialogue. Her plays become less about what is said than about what is left unsaid. They live in the tension between people who yearn to connect with one another rather than the satisfying sizzle of a seamless conversation concocted for the stage.

Silence, even when experienced among a group of people, tends to spur introspection. Kevin Quashie write in his book about quiet and quietness, that “the idea of quiet, then, can shift attention to what is interior. This shift can feel like a kind of heresy if the interior is thought of as apolitical or inexpressive, which it is not: one’s inner life is raucous and full of expression, especially if we distinguish the term ‘expressive’ from the notion of public. Indeed, the interior could be understood as the source of human action—that anything we do is shaped by the range of desires and capacities of our inner life.” Although Quashie writes about quiet specifically as it relates to blackness, his critique here can be used in a the context of the individual
experience of quiet. In this context, Annie Baker writes plays that are undeniably ‘quiet’ in the way that Quashie describes. They are written to almost shockingly reflect everyday language and communication and are lyrical only in their mundanity. Her characters stumble over their own words, and sit in uncomfortable silences, confined together by circumstance and relationship (much like an audience is ‘confined’ to the theater they watch the play in). Silence deepens the language just as it is a mode of language in and of itself.

Baker also uses silence in a way to call her audience’s attention to the fact that they are listening to a piece of theater. The impatient feeling that there is ‘nothing happening’ during silent moments onstage is unfamiliar. To quote Dolar, “The absence of voices and sounds is hard to endure; complete silence is immediately uncanny, it is like death, while the voice is the first sign of life.”\(^{21}\) Silence, to the extent that Baker uses it, tends to throw her audiences off. Her plays are littered with pauses and silences, halting the flow of the dialogue, injecting real life awkwardness into relationships. By creating a more ‘accurate’ representation of the way we communicate on stage, Baker (ironically, perhaps) creates more distance between her audience and the theater that they are attending, since silence and bumbling are so unfamiliar to the stage.

It’s almost frustrating to find an example of what I’m talking about from her plays, because the pauses and silences are spread so evenly, and are baked into every moment of her writing. Take this scene from *The Aliens*:

EVAN. Uh.

(Pause.)
KJ. He died.

(Evan looks at him uncomprehendingly. Pause.)

KJ. Jasper died.

EVAN. …No he didn’t.
KJ. He died a week ago.

(Pause.)

EVAN. No.
(KJ nods.)
EVAN. Come on. Stop it.
(A pause.)
No he didn’t.
(Silence.)
Why are you… stop fucking with me.
(Pause.)
You just said he was sick!
KJ. I’m sorry.
I’m really really sorry.
EVAN. Why are you saying that?

(KJ shrugs. Silence.)
(Evan Walks over to the big recycling bin and tries to knock it over. But this is hard to do. The recycling bin is very, very heavy. It takes Evan a long time. For a while, it seems like he’s not going to be able to do it. Then, finally, he tips it over. The sound of glass bottles falling. Maybe a few roll out onto the ground.)

(Evan walks inside.)

(KJ is alone.)

(After a long time Evan walks out again. He is holding an oatmeal raisin cookie.)

EVAN. What did he die of.

The pauses break up the rhythm of the scene, and the longest extended silence (that is, time without any dialogue) happens when Evan is otherwise physically engaged,
trying to knock over the recycling bin. The height of the drama in the scene, the height of the character’s emotional arc, happens without any dialogue. The audience is left to take in that sight on their own, with no dialogue to distract them from what is happening. It cannot be overstated how radical this is—how unique it is for both actors to play out that final moment, uninhibited by language, and to force the audience to take it in without language’s mediation. Here, Baker prescribes silence as a disquieting quiet for her audience to endure.

Her audiences and her characters experience Baker’s silences together, each with a different kind of agony. The amount of silence she uses often means that her plays are long, usually three hours or longer. Hilton Als explains, “By not rushing things—by letting the characters develop as gradually and inevitably as rain or snowfall—Baker returns us to the naturalistic but soulful theatre that many of her contemporaries and near-contemporaries have disavowed in their rush to be ‘postmodern.’”²³ While the characters agonize over connecting with each other, the audience is left waiting for them to connect, a promise that is rarely (if ever) satisfyingly fulfilled. Instead, communication between characters breaks down, as it does, or people leave, as they do, and the world of the play changes only in that something of significance to a character has happened there. Annie Baker finds stories that seem small in terms of how they shape the world but carry huge personal impact for the people who live them. Baker hears these stories and writes them in a way that allows the subtle underpinnings of complicated relationships to come to light in a slow, methodical, almost musical way.
This is why Annie Baker is a radical, experimental playwright. While the ‘scope’ of her plays are pea-sized compared to the work of some other dramatists, the quiet, mostly silent theatricality that Baker employs pushes her audiences to reexamine the way we interact with one another in such a poignant way. Quashie writes that “quiet helps us to understand the activism involved in being aware, in paying attention, in considering. So much of how we make sense of the world is through social identities, as well as through a discourse of cause and effect: this happens because of that, this produces that. Sometimes these firm logics undermine the opportunity to be in wonder at what is happening to you as well as to be aware that you ‘happen’ to the world.” Baker utilizes quiet to this end in her work. By situating her audience within scenes of quiet, she asks them to turn inward, making them aware of the theatricality of what they are experiencing, of what the character and actor are doing and going through, and what effect it is having on them, all at once. By providing silence, she provides space for her audience’s consternation. By giving the audience nothing to listen to, she forces them to listen to themselves.
Attention

Going to see a play requires attention. That is, to experience a play, you must be paying attention to it. You cannot wander through a theater anytime and see a show, like an art gallery, nor can you choose when and how much to take in, like a book or with television. Furthermore, the actors are in the same room with you, experiencing what is happening along with the audience. Something similar can be said about listening. George Home-Cook argues that “listening is not only something that we do, but is inherently theatrical. As a specialized mode of attention, listening both manipulates and is manipulated by the phenomenon of sound, in a dynamic dance from and through which experience is born.”

Listening is to be both drawn into and interpreting sound at the same time. It is dramatic and engaging, both physically and mentally. It shapes experience and also is the experience. This conception of listening as a form of attendance is representative of the active feedback loop that is created between audiences and performers as a two-way, almost physiological phenomenon. Sound avails itself as a tool of performance in a unique and sneakily powerful way— it shapes the way that the audience engages with the piece, which dictates how they experience the piece, and therefore the energy they put back into the room.

Listening is to pay a kind of directional attention, where the listener is selective in what they’re taking in and also processing. Aural attention is central to Ross Brown’s theory of listening; he calls listening “an anxious tug-of-war between engagement and distraction,” especially in the context of an audience at a performance. This sets up the idea of an “audience” as mass of people, all battling
distractions in order to stay focused on the piece in front of them. From their own bodies (itches, hunger) to the people next to them (coughs, celebrities, elbows) to the environment in and outside the theater (the sound of rain, a siren, frescoes), audience members are tasked with shutting things out in order to open themselves to the performance onstage. The performance, then, is expected to keep each audience member engaged above all else, and every other task of the performance (move the audience, teach the audience, touch the audience) is both secondary to, and dependent on, the performers’ ability to keep the audience’s attention. As I’ve discussed earlier, Baker engages with this paradigm by writing plays that are quiet and employ silence beyond what audiences expect.

In order to invoke the kind of attention that she requires from her audiences, Annie Baker herself is an extremely attentive person. Sarah Larson, in her New Yorker profile of Baker, describes the playwright as someone “who listens to people so carefully, who re-creates human speech with such amusement and care, that her characters feel startlingly familiar—so familiar, in fact, that you might wonder at first why they’re the subjects of a play.”27 It is this familiarity and the idea of importance (or lack thereof), that Baker examines though her work. Her attentiveness to the details of conversation invites the audience to reconsider what kinds of interactions are considered important. She gives weight to everyday conversation that may not seem life-defining, but without question influences and carries heavy significance. It is this attentiveness to the drama and pain of everyday communication that the audience is left to ruminate on as they watch Baker’s characters complete mundane,
sometimes mindless tasks often with nothing to take their mind off of their work besides the other person in the scene with them.

_The Flick_, perhaps Annie Baker’s most famous play, features three characters who work for a movie theater. She describes their costumes as a “degrading” “polo shirt (probably dark blue or purple or maroon) with a little name tag/pin and black pants.”

The first scene of the play starts like this:

**SAM**

We call this the walkthrough.

*Pause.*

**SAM**

Pretty simple.

You just ah…

Avery watches as Sam walks down the last row of seats with his broom, sweeping up popcorn kernels, etc., and pushing them into the dust pan. When Sam finishes the last row and moves to the second-to-last row, Avery awkwardly begins sweeping the last row on his side of the aisle. They continue this way, Sam always one row ahead of Avery, each on his own side of the aisle. Avery is trying to figure out the best way to sweep; it’s harder than it looks. In the third-to-last row, Avery encounters something we cannot see on the floor. He frowns with distaste, then bends over and gingerly picks up a Subway sandwich wrapper. Tiny pieces of shredded lettuce flutter to the ground. Sam looks over, stops what he’s doing, and watches Avery, without offering any suggestions.

Avery walks up the aisle, throws the Subway wrapper in the large trash can, along with the contents of his dust pan, then walks back and goes back to sweeping. For some reason it’s not working—the tiny pieces of lettuce that we can’t see are sticking to the ground. Sam is still watching him. After a while:

**SAM**

Yeah. With the little pieces of lettuce you kind of have to—
Avery interrupts him by bending down to hand-pick the pieces of lettuce off the floor. He mostly disappears from view. Sam watches, then goes back to sweeping. He’s about three rows ahead of Avery when Avery finishes picking up the tiny pieces of lettuce. Cradling them in his palm, Avery walks up the aisle again to the trash can and shakes his palm off into it. Then he goes back to sweeping. After the next row:

AVERY
What do you do about spilled soda?  

The first action that Baker’s audience sees is two men sweeping a movie theater. While there are things that become ingeniously clear over the course of this few paragraphs of stage direction (it’s Avery’s first day, and he is clearly taking cues from Sam; this is the kind of theater where people sneak in their own food; there is soda spilled on the ground), they are all discovered in silence between two people who are not yet comfortable enough with each other to make small talk beyond the task at hand. Structurally, the scene also acts as a sort of litmus test for the audience. Baker starts her play out with a heavy dose of the quit that continues throughout the rest of the script, adjusting her audience to her play world by plunging them into silence, and reintroducing language. Even Sam’s first line after the long silence is jarring and even heightened, even though it’s not even a complete sentence, and it has to do with bits of lettuce being difficult to sweep.

By introducing so much silence into her plays, each line, no matter how mumbled, is heightened. In Baker’s work, replacing language with silence actually zooms in on the detail of everyday language. She makes the audience wait for each line. She entices them to be as attentive as they possibly can be to every word that gets spoken on stage. In interview, she remembers, “When I was seventeen I started
secretly recording people and then transcribing everything, twenty pages of a so-called banal conversation, and then marveling at how beautiful it was when you just write down exactly what people say.”30 Baker’s writing is about the way people talk, and every aspect of her plays serve to point her audience towards attending what is being spoken on stage. The language in her plays are the most important parts, despite the focus that her silences or the meta-theatrical aspects of her plays draw, every dramaturgical tool that Baker uses serves the language of her plays first and foremost.
Conclusion

In theater, listening works on multiple levels—it is the audience’s task, a structural tool, and a writing practice. Performance, and especially theater, is an aural medium as much as it is a physical one, and the way that sound and silence plays a part in shaping theater is still getting explored, even beyond the scope of the audience’s ears. The term ‘aural,’ Ross Brown points out, also refers to a tactile sense of place. George Home-Cook responds to this, saying that “implicitly, Brown’s ‘aural phenomenology of theatre’ not only attends to the experience of hearing with one’s ears, but also to the ways in which we sense the world around us by means of the ‘closely interrelated skin/air senses.’” Listening, then, is both hearing and feeling. Listening is an awareness of space and location. Listening is both the things we are actively paying attention to (“What did she say?”) to the things we aren’t (the dust in the air). Just as the term ‘dramaturgy’ reflects both the in-the-moment and over-arching dramatic structures of a play, ‘listening’ is a state of being in the moment that can be primed, manipulated, and called attention to through performance.

This is what Annie Baker’s plays experiment with: how people cohabitate and communicate, successfully and unsuccessfully. What does it look like to try and communicate with someone and fail, despite both of your best intentions? How does one write contemporary dialogue accurately, and how does one get their audience to not only be interested by that quotidian language, but be moved by it? Her plays are theatrically sonic, with Baker’s own dramaturgical ethos of the everyday baked into every pause, silence and ‘um’ that her characters utter, as well as the stories that she
puts onstage. Externally “low-stakes” drama that nevertheless means everything to the people who are going through what’s happening. The type of drama that consumes the back of your mind while you are completing other tasks throughout your day, rather than the all (time) consuming upheaval of theatrical convention. She is by no means the only playwright who is invested in listening as a tool of performance, and for writing. To conclude this essay, I want to point to a few other writers’ works, and the ways that listening is unfolding as an essential practice across contemporary playwriting, beyond the practicality of writing and rewriting, but as a dramaturgical cornerstone of the contemporary practice.

Taylor Mac is a drag queen, theater artist, and playwright who gained notoriety in New York’s downtown cabaret scene, and whose piece, *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. The show, a 24-hour long musical revue of American pop music is a queer interrogation of American history on such an epic scale I hesitate to call it merely a “play.” Rather than espousing ideas out of the blue, Taylor Mac chooses to illuminate moments in history in order to debate them. Mac writes: “I believe, as a theater artist, I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. Because I believe, as a theater artist, I’m not a teacher; I’m a reminder. I’m just trying to remind you of things you’ve dismissed, forgotten, or buried.” Mac, by his own admission, is not interested in the ‘new’ as much as he wants to be reflective of reality. Mac is more interested in being a careful listener and curator, picking songs, people, and histories, to amplify on stage. This also gives Mac the power to mess with the history that he places onstage. For instance, in *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, Mac reproduces *The Mikado*, but sets it on Mars
rather than Japan. This honors Gilbert & Sullivan’s intention to set the piece in an unfamiliar place (in order to critique western society), but also dishonors and disgraces the racist/colonialist choice to set the play in Japan, a real place with a real history, rather than somewhere made up, like a fictionalized version of Mars.

Just because Mac believes in presenting the past through his work does not mean he sees himself as any less of a storyteller. In another section of Mac’s manifesto, he writes, “I believe whole-heartedly in craft. I believe craft is essentially a commitment to learning the past, living in the present, and dreaming the culture forward. But I believe establishing standards for craft will not create great art but will foster the patriarchy.”

Mac still believes in quality of work, or perhaps, an aspiration towards quality, but without the same, strict assessment that has been traditionally handed down in the world of theater. If Mac sees himself as a collector and re-teller and re-shaper of history, then the way that Mac’s version of history is presented needs to be as thoroughly engaging to the audience as possible. Between the news, classrooms, and conventional wisdom, a lot of Mac’s work takes on topics that audiences may feel that they already know about or understand. Yet, Mac is able to turn household subjects on their head—whether it is a touching, almost unrecognizable cover of “Kiss Me Through the Phone” at Joe’s Pub or getting audience members to throw ping pong balls at each other in order to simulate the Civil War. He listens to the culture around him, and brings it to light in a new way for his audiences, repackaging familiar material so it sounds new and original.

A contemporary playwright who uses listening as a step in her writing process is Lynn Nottage. Her play Sweat (which won the Pulitzer in 2017) was originated
from Nottage spending a two-year period in Reading, PA, the poorest city in America for its size. She describes her initial experience going to Reading as a “listening tour.” She explains, “I was there to try and help answer many questions that I had about what was happening to our country as a whole, and I didn’t find Sweat until I sat down with a group of steel workers.” At that meeting, Nottage heard the story of workers shut out by their management and the wedges that had been forced between friends and neighbors, along socio-economic, racial, and union lines. It was a story that felt familiar to her, and something that she could discuss and dissect on stage.

Nottage and her team kept on talking to people: “We interviewed as many people as possible to find out what was happening in the city, from the police chief, to the homeless, to small business owners, to social workers. We targeted a real wide cross-section of folk who represented the range of people living in Reading,” she said, making sure that a steady dramaturgical foundation had been laid for her play beyond just the people that the piece profiles. The result is a play that is extremely grounded in real experience, and real people, but is also lyrical and moving. By positioning herself as a listener during her writing process, Nottage puts her audience in the same position—opening them up to the lived experience of others by hearing about those experiences first-hand in order to retell them.

Young Jean Lee is another playwright for whom listening is a key part of the creating new work. Lee’s process is based on the principle that she, as the writer, can offer something to a room of people, and the collaborators that she has assembled there can take that and run with it, and give her the necessary feedback to make it better, or closer to realization. “The way that I work is I basically bring pieces of texts
into a room and then everybody in the room tells me what they think of it,” she says, “And everybody in the room has been very carefully selected to be smart and articulate and people I trust. They tell me, they react, they do stuff. I listen to everybody, so it’s really not the case for me that I’m not an auteur in the sense that I have this great sort of vision in my head of how I want things to be. And then everybody helps me achieve that vision. It’s like my vision is much more sort of nebulous. Just so much of my work comes from the performers and comes from whoever happens to be in the room at the time.”

Lee, essentially, sees a vague endpoint, and collects collaborators and processes to get her work to where she wants it to be. This produces wildly different plays—the more ‘accessible’ *Straight White Men* is contrasted with *Untitled Feminist Show*, a piece she constructed with Faye Driscoll, and which is a nude experimental dance show.

All of these writers, from Baker to Lee, have a keen awareness of their own style and their own method. “To feel is always also to feel oneself feel *[se sentir* *sentir]*, but the subject who feels ‘himself’ thus does not exist or is ‘himself’ only in this feeling, through it and even actually is it. There is no subject that is not a sentient subject,” Jean-Luc Nancy writes. Playwrights, sentient to their own subjectivity, not only pass along the many dramaturgical voices that they have collected just through the act of writing, but are constantly self-interrogating and shaping their own voices through the work that they take in. Taylor Mac, Young Jean Lee, and Lynn Nottage all cultivate dramaturgical voices and histories around their work, setting up what Lee calls a “scaffolding” to build their plays. They are hyper-aware of their positionality in relation to the subjects of their plays, and use that awareness to their advantage.
They carefully craft pieces that explore the closeness or distance felt between the writer and the topics that they write about, whether explicitly on stage, their program notes, or baked into the conception of the piece as a whole.

Annie Baker’s writing process also involves her literally listening to her own play over and over, before she ever brings it to a rehearsal room. Pace and its determinant rhythm is something that Baker actively wrestles with while writing, and in order to engage with the rhythm of her shows, she reads her work aloud to herself. She even records herself reading and plays it back to see if the play feels the way she wants. “I do this because it's so important to me that I capture the cadences of painful, ordinary speech, and it's hard to tell if it's believable when it's on the page,” she says, in an interview with Adam Greenfield, the Literary Manager of Playwrights Horizons while *The Flick* was staged there. “So even though I'm a pretty bad actor, I record myself reading all the parts and sitting through all the pauses, and then I listen to it a bunch of times. If I can hear the writer writing, like if there's thinly–disguised exposition or a nudge to the audience or some kind of obvious point made, I go back and change it.” Baker’s painstaking approach to captivating the ‘ordinary’ goes as far as taking as many active steps as she can to iron out her own ‘voice’ as a writer in her own work. This is not a unique aspect of her writing process—there are many playwrights who continue to tweak their work even past opening night, but it speaks to the dedication that Baker has to the aural nature of her plays, the silent fabric of her work, and how she can lull her audiences into paying attention.

So, listening is baked into the dramaturgy of contemporary theater, from audience expectations, to modes of theatricality. Playwrights are stretching
themselves as listeners and stretching how they engage with the audience as listening subjects. Theater is a live art form—it is performed by and on live bodies for live audiences, and that inherent, in-the-moment paradigm that is central to performance is also central to listening and engaging with the listening ‘self’ of both the audience and artist.
Notes

3 Nancy, *Listening*, 41.
5 Ibid., 27.
7 Ibid.
10 Crespo, Melissa, “Paula Vogel on Plasticity,” filmed at Bake off 2014 at the Yale School of Drama, New Haven, CT, video, 1:34.
29 Ibid., 10.
31 Home-Cook, Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves, 36.
32 Mac, Taylor, “I Believe.”
33 Ibid.
38 Lee, Young Jean, interview.
39 Baker, Annie, interview.
Bibliography


